

## **Parents' perceptions of planning for and provision of early childhood services in rural and regional NSW.**

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*The ongoing development of early childhood services in Australia reflects a focus on meeting the demands of changing family needs. Simultaneously, there is a growing concern that quality services must reflect the needs and culture of individual children. Rural contexts are acknowledged as unique situations in this discussion. This study considers the perceptions of eighteen parents in rural New South Wales as a means of gathering data on the appropriateness of current service provision models for a range of rural settings. Parents identified cost, inflexibility of existing services, lack of specific services and distance as factors that need to be considered in planning for rural early childhood services. Innovative approaches for enriching experiences of children and families in the rural context were suggested by the participants: flexible use of existing facilities, more outreach services, programs to encourage local development of services, sporting and cultural opportunities and initiatives to entice trained experienced professionals to rural areas.*

Recognition of the changing needs of families in the 1980s and 1990s (Haddock, 1996) has resulted in rapid development of early childhood services in Australia. The response to a range of associated issues and policies, such as International Labour Organisation Conventions 156 and 165, workers with family responsibilities, the Convention on the Rights of the Child and social justice strategies has also seen the development of patchwork child and family policy (Edgar, 1991; The Law Reform Commission, 1994; Gifford, 1992). There has been control of development of children's services at various levels in the states and territories. However, reflecting the lack of strong child and family policy, there has been no overall national planning for children's services (Gifford, 1992; Vaughan & Cahir, 1996). Proposals by the Australian Early Childhood Association for a national framework for children's services (Vaughan & Cahir, 1996) mark an appropriate time when the planning for such services might begin to better reflect the needs of children and their families.

The planning for and provision of early childhood services in rural and remote areas has been seen as a special case requiring innovative programs (Haddock, 1996). However, responses to inquiries have often indicated that the present form of service provision is far from satisfactory (The Law Reform Commission, 1994; Senate Employment, Education and Training References Committee, 1996; Vaughan & Cahir, 1996). The provision of children's services must reflect child-focused principles while responding to family and local community needs. In order to achieve social justice and equity the views of families also need to be considered (Ruchel, 1995; Cahir, 1996; du Plessis & Bailey, 2000). Professionals in the field are accountable not only to the children in their care but also to parents and the community of which they are part (Ebbeck & Ebbeck, 1994). As Powell says '[the separation of] child care needs from other aspects of family functioning runs contrary to reality' (Powell, 1989, p.122). Quality services must give greater attention to parent perspectives (Powell, 1998).

Social justice and equity have been discussed in the general education field but the specifics related to the early childhood field are seen as a challenge the field must face (Ruchel, 1995). Understanding the social stratification within each rural and regional community is something which can not always be done from a distance or even by visiting service providers (Stevens, 1994; Kilmartin, 1996). While some service providers situated in particular communities may be aware of underlying stratification (Stevens, 1994), their ability as 'blow-ins' (McNamara, 1996) to interpret the effects for specific families is restricted by their own acceptance in the community. The services

provided exist in a social context that needs to be acknowledged in planning. Family factors do not only influence the children's experiences in any children's service (Howes & Hamilton, 1993) but also their development and education (Stevens, Rough & Maude, 1993).

Part of the Australian Living Standards Study, reported by Kilmartin (1996), highlights the discrepancies between parents' and providers' perceptions of factors of isolation and the identification of problems in their rural settings. Other research has shown differences between parents' and professionals' perceptions of the importance of particular criteria of quality child care (Williams & Ainley, 1994). There are various explanations for the differences in point of view in both these cases. However, the overall issue highlights the importance of supplementing information from one group with information from the other in order to have a more effective data base from which to plan. The notion of including parents' perceptions is strongly supported by du Plessis and Bailey (2000) in the Project of National Significance designed to gain a comprehensive insight into the provision of educational services for students with disabilities living in geographically isolated areas of Australia.

Recent research, although mainly limited to small case studies carried out by professionals working in services, has gathered useful data from families through interviews and questionnaires. These data indicate that families in rural areas are using and are satisfied with whatever services are available to them. However, the gap between the service provided and the perceived needs is of concern (Incerti, 1990; Simpson, 1993a, 1993b; McGowan, 1994; du Plessis & Bailey, 2000). This pattern of reasonable satisfaction and identified areas that need attention reflects the views of parents in other settings (Kontos, 1992; du Plessis & Bailey, 2000). However, a number of other factors have been identified as inhibiting child and family experiences in a range of rural settings and circumstances in Australia. Identified factors related to access include distance, travel requirements, cost, and limited access to facilities and experienced professionals. In addition, social and economic factors such as lack of cultural understanding on the part of professionals, funding and regulatory bodies, the need for heavy parental and community involvement to maintain viability of services and the inflexibility of service provision impact on family experiences (Incerti, 1990; Simpson, 1993a, 1993b; McGowan, 1994; McKenzie, 1994; Community Child Care Co-operative, 1995; Fyffe, Gavidia-Payne & McCubbery, 1995; Grimmett & Simpson, 1995; Kilmartin, 1996; du Plessis & Bailey, 2000; Simpson & White, 2000).

The identification of these factors as inhibitors of child and family experiences indicates a number of perspectives of the purpose of early childhood service provision. The areas of concern not only reflect the view that the interests of children must be paramount in any planning (Vaughan & Cahir, 1996) but also the view that the benefits of early childhood services flow on to parents, families, communities and society in general (Gifford, 1992). Lack of opportunity is the overarching consideration in the investigation of early childhood service provision in rural areas: lack of opportunity to access quality affordable care and education which promote wellbeing and child development across all domains in a culturally appropriate safe environment (Vaughan & Cahir, 1996); lack of opportunity for children and adults to access a range of social experiences; lack of opportunity to access professional support; and lack of opportunity for parents to access education, employment and increased income (Gifford, 1992).

Opportunity is seen to be the process by which early childhood services serve the immediate needs of children and carry out the societal functions of education (for future benefits), labour market development and social service. Some researchers have acknowledged the unique characteristics of various rural communities in achieving service provision which reflects the nature of the environment and meets some of the needs of children and families within the framework of the limited opportunities (Incerti, 1990; Simpson, 1993a, 1993b; McGowan, 1994; McKenzie, 1994; Fyffe, Gavidia-Payne & McCubbery, 1995; Grimmett & Simpson, 1995; Simpson & White, 2000).

There are no simple solutions in response to the factors which limit opportunity in rural and remote settings and there is little value in funded support alone (Fyffe, et al., 1995; Simpson &

White, 2000). However, the research thus far has overlooked the value of participants' views in terms of meeting the needs in their particular situation. In fact, those who stand to gain from their development more easily envisage models of innovative and flexible service provision.

The diversity of rural and remote communities has been recognised in discussion around planning (Haddock, 1996; The Law Reform Commission, 1994; Hayden, 2000; Simpson & White, 2000) and to some degree responded to at service level by staff (Simpson, 1993 b; Grimmer & Simpson, 1995; McNamara, 1996). There is a continuing need for research to be carried out so that data reflect the views of a diverse range of families in rural, regional and remote areas in general and then those in cultural and special needs subgroups (Procter, 1992; Fyffe et al., 1995; du Plessis & Bailey, 2000). In order to effectively put the discussion on planning and the response together this study poses the question, 'What are the perceptions of parents in rural/regional areas of New South Wales concerning planning for and provision of appropriate early childhood services in their communities?'

## **Method**

### **Sample**

Twenty families with children aged from birth to eight years living in rural and regional areas of New South Wales were approached to participate in the study. The sample was not random as access to these families was made through contact with service directors, coordinators, team leaders and recommendations from one family to another. Eighteen of the families approached returned the questionnaire. The participants live in a range of settings including a regional city, small rural community, small rural village, remote rural town and the surrounding districts of each.

The selection of families did not require that they use early childhood services in their area. However, the use of professional contacts did result in the selection of seventeen families who do use existing centre-based early childhood services.

### **Instrument**

Information was collected from families by way of a questionnaire developed for this study. The questionnaire was developed based on findings of and the questionnaires used in other relevant recent research (Simpson, 1993a; McKenzie, 1994; Fyffe, Gavidia-Payne & McCubbery, 1995). The Parenting and Employment Scale (Cuskelly, Hayes, Kirkegaard & Way, 1996) influenced the presentation of the questionnaire.

Responses to the questionnaire included information about each family's present access to and usage of early childhood services. The questionnaire listed factors that may make use of services a problem for families. Participants were asked to mark those factors that applied to them. The factors listed were: no service available, no need for service, cost, travel, services do not meet needs, unsatisfactory standard of service, inflexibility of service and lack of understanding of culture. Space was provided for recording other factors and details of difficulties. In addition participants' views on possible solutions for planning and provision of appropriate early childhood services in their area and identification of factors which need to be considered in their particular community were requested.

### **Procedure**

Five families from each of the locations were approached to participate in the study so that data from a range of at least four different contexts was collected. The questionnaire was distributed and collected by two means depending on the location of the participant. Where possible the questionnaire was presented to the participant and collected by the researcher or one of the contact professionals. Where distance was a factor the questionnaires were sent and returned by post. In all

cases the participants were given an addressed envelope to place the response in before returning it. Stamped envelopes were provided to contact professionals and those returning their responses by post. Where it was necessary to clarify a participant's response the researcher contacted the participant by telephone and carried out a short interview and added any information collected to the participant's response.

Data collected were coded by categories of context (location and services available) and satisfaction with the services and experiences and sub-coded according to the factors that influenced the level of satisfaction. Data collected from the open-ended items of the questionnaire related to solutions for more appropriate service provision. These data were categorised into supplemental codes according to whether the response was directly related to responses to previous questions or whether it was an additional more general response to perceived problems.

## **Results**

The responses from eighteen participants consisted of three from the remote rural town and five from each of the regional city, small rural community and rural village settings. Thirty-eight children between birth and eight years were represented by the responses.

The care most commonly used by the participants was babysitting by relatives and friends. A centre-based service (preschool or long day care) was also used by all but one participant. One participant added tennis and piano lessons to the list of other services used.

The data show that less than a third of these families (five participants indicated that they were satisfied with the present situation) are satisfied with the services and experiences available for their children. Two participants indicated that they did not need the services or their satisfaction was dependent on changes to funding. The level of satisfaction in the regional city (2 positive responses and 2 conditional responses from the five participants), small rural community (2 positive responses from the five participants) and small rural village (1 positive response from the five participants) contexts corresponds to the range of services available. There were no responses of satisfaction from the three participants in the remote rural town context where there was access to two centre-based services.

Cost was identified as the most common factor that makes use of a service a problem for participants (7 responses). Two of these responses came from regional city participants who referred to the impact of changing levels of funding from government sources. The other responses mentioned cost in association with other factors of travel and low income. The inflexible nature of existing services and the fact that a particular service is unavailable both scored five responses from the same participants. Travel was identified in three responses as a concern, however, one of these participants specified the lack of public transport in the regional city as the travel problem. Unsatisfactory standard of service and needs of the participant not being met were both mentioned once. Lack of understanding of the participant's culture was not identified as a problem in any of the responses.

Suggestions for more appropriate service provision in the participant's area in general reflected the factors indicated in the question about satisfaction with existing services. Factors that were identified as needing consideration in more appropriate service provision are summarised in Table 1.

**Table 1. Factors needing consideration**

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<i>Distance from other towns &amp; facilities</i>	<i>3 responses</i>
<i>Trained professionals deterred by remoteness</i>	<i>1 response</i>
<i>Travelling to work means longer hours of care</i>	<i>1 response</i>
<i>Not everyone lives in the town itself</i>	<i>1 response</i>
<i>Lack of opportunities in the area</i>	<i>1 response</i>
<i>Low income of the area</i>	<i>1 response</i>
<i>Cost</i>	<i>1 response</i>
<i>Limited child care places</i>	<i>2 responses</i>
<i>Lack of public transport</i>	<i>1 response</i>

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Factors related to distance from other towns and remoteness attracted six responses and when 'lack of opportunities in the area' was clarified in a telephone interview, it emerged there were some aspects of this response that also referred to distance from major centres and employment opportunities.

The participants identified five service types that should be available, also reflecting which services were already available. Services identified were occasional care, long day care, before and after school care, vacation care and multipurpose services. They also indicated that quantity and quality of service are important. The need for more preschool and child care places was indicated in two responses and the need for professionally trained staff was emphasised in one response from a remote setting.

Participants' responses to the open-ended item requesting solutions to the problem of providing appropriate early childhood services reflected consideration of their own family situation, problems of the local setting and areas of concern for rural communities in general.

Table 2 provides a summary of these responses. Participants who indicated that they were satisfied with the services and experiences available did not respond to this question.

Follow up telephone interviews highlighted some interesting aspects of participants' responses. Some participants had found it difficult to say that they were not satisfied with the services because they felt that the existing service was high quality but that it was the range of services that was lacking. Two participants had not wanted to write on the questionnaire that the staff at the existing services often helped out with more flexible care arrangements when needed, despite regulations, as they were concerned that it would reflect poorly on the staff and their centre. Another participant commented that she had originally not written a comment about cultural and sporting opportunities as she didn't wish to appear to be a 'whinger' when her family chooses to live where they do.

**Table 2. Solutions for appropriate provision of early childhood services.**

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- *Reconsideration of the withdrawal of operational subsidy funding*
  - *Recognition of early childhood services as educational services and funded as such*
  - *More outreach services*
  - *Encourage local development of services*
  - *Encourage sporting and cultural facilities and experiences to come to the town*
  - *Better use of existing facilities to cover community needs*
  - *Trained staff for all services in all locations*
  - *Communication with families in each community about their changing needs*
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## **Discussion**

Parents' perceptions of planning for and provision of appropriate early childhood services in their communities are influenced by the context (geographical and existing services), as well as more general issues of access to services. While the generalisability of the data from such a small sample study should be questioned, the small number of participants who were satisfied with the existing services and experiences for their children across four contexts indicates the need for further investigation in this area. The range of suggested solutions to the problems presented also supports the notion of taking the views of parents in specific and general rural contexts into consideration when planning and providing early childhood services for them.

Cost is a major factor for parents in accessing appropriate early childhood services in the rural areas studied. While the cost of actual service is a concern for families in each of the rural contexts, those in smaller and remote areas consider the added cost for travel to be problematic. Families in smaller and remote locations were also conscious of the impact of a volatile rural economy on their ability to pay for the service. More specific information regarding the cost factors would be needed to interpret these responses in greater detail. Nonetheless, city-based policy makers may overlook this aspect of cost.

Inflexibility of existing services highlighted by parents in this study corresponds with the findings and views of other researchers (Incerti, 1990; Simpson, 1993a, 1993b; McGowan, 1994; Grimmett & Simpson, 1995). Some parents indicated that often the existing service providers 'bent the rules' to help out with their needs. Responses to these needs should become part of the regular service provision. As discussed in Simpson (1993a, 1993b) access to more appropriate service for the wellbeing of children and parents should not rely on the goodwill of staff in rural services. The special characteristics of the rural context which are acknowledged in literature (The Law Reform Commission, 1994; Haddock, 1996; Senate Employment, Education and Training References Committee, 1996; Vaughan & Cahir, 1996) should be recognised by regulatory and funding bodies, accepting the possible flexible nature of these services in meeting the needs of rural families (Simpson & White, 2000). As parents linked the lack of specific services with the inflexibility of existing services they were making suggestions for a means of overcoming problems within their own setting. While they did not label it as such they were suggesting that flexible multipurpose service models would be appropriate in their community.

This study found that parents in the same and different rural contexts had different perceptions of the effects of distance and remoteness adding another dimension to Kilmartin's (1996) findings where differing perceptions were noted between the parent and provider groups. For example, the assumption that access to services is easier in regional cities was questioned. Poor public transport in these contexts has an impact on families' abilities to access services. As choice of service type

and location may in turn be influenced by this factor, planning for services should reflect consideration of transport facilities in regional communities.

When analysing the responses to the questions related to solutions for the provision of more appropriate early childhood services the most outstanding feature is that the participants are not only able to identify factors which need consideration and the service types needed but also match these with acceptable solutions. Some of the solutions reflect what the early childhood field Australia-wide is trying to achieve within a framework of providing quality early childhood services for all children (Vaughan & Cahir, 1996). On the other hand, other solutions support the notion of responding to specific contexts with specific service delivery. In particular, the idea of encouraging local development of services may appear to be an obvious solution, but in fact most service development is carried out at locations far from the rural contexts explored in this study. The effects, sometimes tragic, of urban solutions applied to rural problems have been recognised (Simpson & White, 2000). Schemes for encouraging development at a local level, whether the service is a community or commercial concern, have merit. Empowering those who have relevant knowledge and expertise (Hayden, 2000) is essential for achieving appropriate quality services. Similarly the concept of developing more outreach services or encouraging trained staff, sporting and cultural experiences in rural and remote areas through special schemes or links to tertiary education institutions should be explored further (du Plessis & Bailey, 2000). All the suggestions made by participants reflect attempts to fill the gaps in opportunities available to rural families.

The present study, although limited by sample size, identifies areas for further study. A larger-scale study should consider degrees of satisfaction with existing services and explore the areas of cultural, sporting and life experiences as well as the traditional care and education aspects of early childhood service provision in rural areas. The perceived effects resulting from lack of opportunity in rural settings is another area that deserves attention. The actual experiences of young children in rural and remote areas should be studied to evaluate the positive effects of their environment rather than always considering it as a deficit model. The fact that parents have such high regard for existing services suggests that these services may be reflecting the local community values in addition to values held by early childhood professionals in the wider community.

Perceptions of families in rural/regional areas of Australia concerning the planning for and provision of appropriate early childhood services in their communities should be valued and responded to. The result will be that the diversity of the Australian context is truly respected in matching services with children, their families and communities.

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